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PECKING THE HANDS THAT FEED THEM:  
HOW SOCIETY AND GOVERNMENT HAVE ALLOWED THE POULTRY  
INDUSTRY TO EXPLOIT LABOR AND THE ENVIRONMENT IN THE AMERICAN  
SOUTH

by  
SOPHIE KLINE

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
April 2020

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## *ACKNOWLEDGMENTS*

*To my family:*

*Thank you for being a constant source of support and guidance.*

*ABSTRACT*

SOPHIE KLINE: Pecking The Hands That Feed Them:  
How Society And Government Have Allowed The Poultry Industry To Exploit Labor and  
The Environment In The American South  
(Under the direction of Dr. Catarina Passidomo)

Americans eat an average of ninety pounds of chicken in one year, but where does that chicken come from? Immigrants and African Americans are the majority of the labor population in poultry processing plants located in the American South. In an effort to highlight the racism, sexism, insecurity and environmental degradation in the poultry industry, I analyze a variety of ethnographies, articles, and science journals as well as U.S Supreme Court decisions and policies enacted by the U.S federal government in this thesis. Upon examination, I answer why society is pecking the hands that feed them. The analysis concludes that American consumers are unaware that they *are* pecking the hands that feed them. The exploitation of labor in agricultural industries has been an open secret for hundreds of years, allowing an exploitative culture to be accepted amongst consumers; therefore, the suffering of the poultry industry is allowed to continue undisturbed.

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## *CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION*

Arriving at the University of Mississippi in 2016, I was aware of the racial inequality and the turbulent history behind James Meredith's struggle as the first African American student enrolled at the University. Being a University Ambassador as a freshman, I thought I was educated on how to delicately handle questions of inclusion, defending the University and its open and honest dialogue; however, through the years at Ole Miss, I was faced with something entirely different from what I expected and realized I had absolutely no idea what I was defending. A romanticized version of the South was crushed by the events that occurred in the last four years. In 2019, the Ku Klux Klan, Neo-Nazis and other pro-Confederate members made an appearance in the heart of campus to protest the relocation of a confederate monument. Some months later in the summer, national news released that Kappa Alpha Fraternity members captured a picture of themselves donning their shotguns in front of the bullet-riddled Emmett Till memorial sign. This comes after some University students venerated lynching by hanging a noose around a statue of James Meredith in 2014, and more protests by Klan members and Neo-Nazis during the removal of the Mississippi state flag, which contains the Confederate battle emblem, from the heart of campus. When many university buildings were constructed with the labor of enslaved African Americans on land stolen from

indigenous people, “open and honest dialogue” is not a promising or sufficient solution to racial inequality.

During August of 2019, Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers (ICE) invaded five poultry companies, two of them being the poultry giants Peco and Koch, and their factories located in Mississippi. The raid ended in 680 arrests of mostly Latin American immigrants, making it the largest single, in-state ICE raid in history, altering the lives of poultry factory workers and their families. Contributing to the University of Mississippi’s open and honest dialogue, an opinion writer for the *Daily Mississippian*, a University of Mississippi student-authored an article titled, “ICE Raids are a Legitimate Solution to Illegal Immigration” (Moses, 2019). Roughly a month after the ICE raids took place, the author disagrees with calling the Mississippi raids “a gross display of humanity,” but rather a beneficial process that needs to be completed to protect the American borders from illegal immigrants (Moses, 2019).

As of November 2019, chicken production has not slowed in response to this investigation and the poultry giants affected by these ICE raids have faced no consequences for employing “illegal” immigrants. I put “illegal” in scare quotes because it is a poor and ironic term used to describe the individuals that are employed to supply the ninety pounds of chicken to feed an average American per year (Stuesse, 2016, pp.3 ). This is not the first instance of poultry giants escaping justice. In 2001, Tyson was indicted with over thirty counts of hiring and recruiting undocumented immigrants to work in their factories; however, a jury promptly acquitted Tyson on all charges even though there were eyewitness accounts (Stuesse, 2016, pp. 170).



After brainstorming with Dr. Passidomo, the environment on the University of Mississippi's campus and recent raids inspired the analysis of the poultry industry in the American South. Chicken, a seemingly simple meat eaten almost every day by a majority of the U.S. population, holds an important dialogue between race and sex, labor, public health, and the environment. I do not know if the *Daily Mississippian* author, or anyone else that consumes chicken, also understands the disastrous consequences that the ICE raids have on the lives of families in the southern states. The chicken industry and its effects on people of color are often hidden away from the public eye, so unless these narratives are actively researched, it is easy for the consumer to passively endorse an industry that is rife with racism, inhumane labor, and unethical policies. I found a similar sentiment while studying at the University of Mississippi. Students, being consumers, at times are unknowing of the racial and socioeconomic inequality and its effects on people of color. It is convenient to be a student with the privilege to ignore inequality on campus, and it is also convenient to be a consumer and to be able to passively endorse the poultry industry without recognizing its consequences. For example, the massive amounts of commercial chicken consumed by UM students at the campus Chick-Fil-A. This clear pattern and my own failure as a consumer of chicken and as a student at the University of Mississippi, inspired me to research the poultry industry in the American South.

This paper demonstrates how justice has slipped between the cracks and how agribusiness has arrived at what it is today. Cheap labor in the agricultural industry has been the throughline that connects chicken and the American South, yet a capitalistic and consumer-based society seems to punish the individuals that provide for its people. The

main question that will be answered is how has the poultry industry arrived at the point of pecking the hands that feed it?

To answer this question, I first researched the history of chicken and the emergence and growth of the commercial poultry industry in the South. For the literature review (Chapter Two), I chose a variety of ethnographies, articles, and science journals, to answer the question of why society and the state have allowed the poultry industry to get to this point. Each section will give a different perspective of the industry with different people and different stories. These sources contain narratives, opinions, and facts from many individuals who have experienced and/or studied the history of the chicken in the American South. All sources demonstrate the racial and social nuances that surround chicken and how it is processed. Chapters Two and Three are both divided into the following subsections: *Places*, *Labor*, *Race & Sex*, and *Environment & Public Health*.

In addition to the literature review, I also developed a timeline of policy analysis to fully understand the role of the United States government in allowing the poultry industry to evade justice and ethical practices. Using the same thematic organization described above, the policies provide a technical narrative to the United States' interpretation of the Constitution through Supreme Court cases and programs enacted by law-makers. Policies and Supreme Court cases are from a variety of official government resources, direct language from the specific policies mentioned, newspaper articles and ethnographies. Finally, In Chapter Four, I conclude the thesis by answering the question of why society is pecking the hands that feed it by joining the two reviews together,

overlapping the information and narratives to offer a reflection on the suffering caused by the poultry industry and its disregard for ethical practices.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

In *Places*, I discuss the homeplace of chicken and how the South's reign was enabled by money allocated to white farmers and oppression on people of color. This section contains articles and ethnographies detailing the lives of black women and highlighting the institutional racism of the American South. In *Labor*, I aim to accurately describe why the poultry industry moved to the South and, since then, how the industry has been depending on the cheap labor of black and Latinx individuals. In the third section named *Race & Sex*, racial hierarchies, black women, sexual assault, and racist legislation is examined using the two main texts: Psyche William-Forson's *Building Houses out of Chicken Legs* and Angela Stuesse's *Scratching out a living Latinos, race, and work in the Deep South*. Finally, in *Public Health and The Environment*, I thread together resources that are not often used to describe the poultry industry. Using the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and other scientific reports, I piece together the effects of carbon emissions by the poultry industry. Health issues related to the employees and the general consumer will also be deliberated. I conclude with *What's Next*, which summarizes some policies that have been made to protect workers and the environment from the dangers of the industry.

## *PLACES*

Since the founding of the Jamestown colony in 1607, chicken has lived on the eastern side of the United States. Used for some trade and a quaint food supply for colonial families, the chicken remained a small commodity for much time in American history (Rude, 2017, pp. 10). During the Antebellum period, enslaved people were to tend to the chickens in markets and on the plantations that they were forced to live at. These markets and plantations were the first places that chicken was retailed. In the Antebellum South, enslaved black women would often travel to the city markets with permission from the plantation owner to sell and trade with other individuals in the market (Williams-Forsen, 2006, pp. 17). Dressed by these women, the chicken would be plucked, dismembered by hand and sold to the paying customer. Typically, black, enslaved women would tend to the plantation's chicken. Before cooking for the plantation family, black women would be in charge of dressing the chicken before dinner as well (Williams-Forsen, 2006, pp.22). Even after emancipation, the keeping of chickens was considered small farming and until the 1920s, a chicken's place was in family yards.

While some authors debate when chicken started to become a major commodity, most concur that Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal created the demand when he allowed the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to allot money and land for people to farm chicken instead of cotton, to further ration red meat during World War II, and to make a sizeable profit (Gisolfi, 2017, pp. 10). This chicken boom was all across the United States, not just focused on the American South; however, from about the 1950s to

today, Georgia, North Carolina, Alabama, Arkansas, and Mississippi are the leading states in the production of chicken (Rude, 2017, pp. 5).

One of the southern regions that have been hosting the chicken industry since the 1920s is Georgia's Upcountry, a region located north of Atlanta. With a landscape consisting of hills and dry soil, major cash crops like King Cotton were difficult to yield a profit. Monica Gisolfi highlights that part of Georgia which received thousands of dollars from the USDA and Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) in order for local farmers to cease the cotton crop and convert to building chicken broilers and houses. While a majority of the farmers were poor, the boom in chicken allowed for more prosperity in the region outside of Atlanta. By 1949, the Upcountry was producing over 49 million chickens per year (Gisolfi, 2017, pp. 21).

In 1930s Springdale, Arkansas, John Tyson began his own business of transporting chickens between states. When he was able to make more money due to his innovation of keeping the chickens healthy during travel, Tyson was able to buy hatcheries and parts of factories to begin his own poultry reign. By 1960, he was managing over 96,000 broilers. As author Steve Striffler points out, even though Tyson was not a true farmer, his success was encouraged by asking others for help and merging with other poultry companies.

While the Upcountry region and Tyson were a major stepping stone in the world of the poultry industry, many of the factories were still located in the North-East of the United States due to a strong labor force and industrialized economy; however, in the mid-1950s the poultry industry realized the premier retail was in the American South.

From that period on factories migrated to the rural South in search of cheap labor, cheap land, and lax laws.

In the early 1950s, Arkansas had one of the first true poultry plants. What was once a petrol-centered town, El Dorado became a hotbed for the poultry industry and individuals who wanted to work in the factory. In the early 1950s, town boosters and the El Dorado Chamber of Commerce saw the fruitful fashion of the chicken industry and desired to be included considering it was desperate times for local farmers. Author La Guana Gray highlights the strong-willed residents of El Dorado and their dedication to raising enough money to build a brand new factory in order to entice poultry king J-M Poultry into settling down in the oil-inflated town. The factory itself has been exchanged through multiple hands. In 1984, J-M Poultry was bought by ConAgra, and then brought by Pilgrims Pride and, at its most successful points in history, totaled over 1 billion dollars of revenue a year; however, in 2009, Pilgrims Pride filed for bankruptcy and, along with 1000 employees, El Dorado lost its source of revenue (Gray, 2013, pp. 220).

Around the same time that El Dorado's poultry industry was starting to develop, so was a business based on the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina. Appalachian North Carolina was incredibly poor, and as a 1940s resident described, "Here, in the 1930s and 1940s, everyone was poor, and no one seemed to ever get out of it. To get out, you need something. People here have nothing." (Striffler, 2007, pp. 36) Holly Farms was started by a man named Charles Odell Lovette, and unlike El Dorado, his farm began from humble beginnings. Like companies in other Southern states, Charles Lovette's chicken farm benefitted from the wartime policies of WWII and the

FDR New Deal allotments that quartered off the land for farmers to raise chickens (Striffler, 2007, pp.55). Until the later 1940s, Charles Lovette was in charge, but when the demand for chickens got to be too much to handle, he employed his son Fred Lovette, and from then on, Holly Farms would skyrocket in innovation and as world suppliers of chicken. Holly Farms invented the “Holly Pak,” which was a revolutionary technology that allowed processed (dismembered) chicken to customers all over the world by refrigeration. Their progression in modern technology allowed a foothills farm to clear over \$100 billion in sales and producing over 5.4 million chickens a week (Striffler, 2007, pp. 61). While Holly Farms changed the rules for the participating poultry giants, their fame did not last long. In the 1980s, Fred Lovette fell victim to the tyranny of Arkansas’ Tyson Foods, and Holly Farms was swallowed by the successful branding of Tyson.

Since colonization, chicken has had many places in our society. Beginning on small farms, the chicken was a small commodity used for their eggs and occasional meat; however, today chicken has its place in factories and processing plants located in the American South. Known for its hilly country and cheap land, the southern states have been the major place for the beginning of the poultry giant’s dominance and the end of the chicken’s life. The next section will link this history with a discussion of labor and neoliberal policies in the poultry industry, considered primarily through the works of Angela Stuesse’s 2016 ethnography and Whittaker’s 2006 congressional overview on labor practices in the poultry processing industry.



## *LABOR*

Before the 1940's poultry industry boom, factories, and processing plants were located in the Northeast region of the United States, in cities such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Factories were easy to come by due to the industrial infrastructure advantage that the cities already had in place. The working demographic employed in these plants were mostly white men and women and European immigrants who searched for work during the Depression. In the 1950s, the northern poultry industry employed around 250,000 people (Whittaker, 2006, pp. 8). The work in these plants was still as dangerous and risky as it is today, but this workforce was stable, mostly white and under the Wagner Act of 1935, had the ability to unionize and demand a safer work environment. In 1943, the United Packinghouse Workers of America (UPWA) banded together meatpacking and poultry industry employees to protect the rights of political and ethnic minorities. Their grassroots initiative was to defend the worker and labor rights in these factories and to protect from capitalism's greed (Whittaker, 2006, pp. 20).

By the end of World War II, the workforce of European immigrant poultry workers declined, but the demand for chicken was steadfastly increasing. The white, U.S citizen counterparts were unionizing and giving the poultry industry a headache. The Northeast poultry industry looked towards the neoliberal American South. With some prime examples of Tyson and Upcountry Georgia, factories decided to migrate to the South in search of cheap land and cheap labor that would not unionize. As Whittaker explains, leaving behind a strong, stable labor force would allow for the industry to negotiate wages for the low-skilled, Southern labor force (Whittaker, 2006, pp. 2). This

strategy was successful for the industry but detrimental to the individuals that would be exploited in the processing plants. Compared to the North, the standards of workplace safety, wages, and expectations of equality were lowered.

Beginning in the 1920s, the United States begins to see an increase in the mainly Mexican population that moved to work in the meatpacking industry. Around the 1970s and 1980s, while black women were the majority of employees in the poultry plants, the industry realized the untapped labor force of the Latinx immigrant. Recruiters would arrive at towns along the border, or ports where migrant labor lived to advertise the work at poultry processing plants. Not checking the immigrants' documentation, the recruiters would board individuals on to a bus, bus them to factories in southern states, and toss them into the factories to work. One narrative of a Latinx individual from Stuesse's *Scratching Out a Living* shares,

I talked to this Cuban guy and he told me that the next group was leaving that weekend, on a bus, and they would pay my way. In that office, they put on a video that showed the plant, the workers with their white smocks, and the chickens going by on the line. It showed the city, the bank, the police station, the grocery store. And it said this was a good place to live and work, a tranquil place that didn't sell beer, with a school for children and all the comforts one could hope for. (pp. 78)

Many of these individuals fall victim to the propaganda of poultry recruiters. This "tranquil" setting is a lie that is fed to workers who are desperate to provide for their families. When immigrants arrive, they are often taken immediately to the factory to

work, and many immigrants share accounts of living in one-bedroom trailers, with a dozen poultry employees rotating night and day shifts to share the beds (Stuesse, 2016, pp. 79).

Once in the factories, the black and immigrant labor force was trapped. In addition to being threatened with replacements and deportation, employees of the poultry factory often had their wages stolen (Stuesse, 2016, pp. 79). The federal Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) states that all workers have a right to be paid for all of the hours on the job. The standard is minimum wage and “time and time and a half” for all overtime hours. The U.S born and immigrant employees alike have reported that they have been cheated out of their pay. One woman states that for forty-three hours of work, she “got a paycheck for \$19.97 and then next \$45.00 for a full week of work.” (Stuesse, 2006, pp. 134) In 2007, Koch foods received some backlash and were required to pay \$325,000 to immigrants in their plants after an investigation found evidence that Koch did not pay their workers for overtime.

This analysis of the labor force is just another demonstration of the plantation economy. The parallel between white plantation owners who have unpaid, enslaved labor and the privileged factory owners of poultry giants and their labor force, cannot be ignored. Wage theft, false recruiting, trapping are all examples of devaluing an individual. Taking advantage of immigrants who do not know their rights or black individuals who have been oppressed for hundreds of years is a matter that individuals in Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), USDA, consumers and poultry giants failed to fully acknowledge. Again, we see details of how individuals in the

processing plants are treated even though that labor force are the ones that supply the general public with their ninety pounds of chicken per year.

### *RACE & SEX*

In *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs*, Psyche Williams-Forsson details how chicken, since the first enslaved people arrived in the States, has been associated with racist tropes and stereotypes (2006). Williams-Forsson examines the role that chicken has played in the history of black women's lives through narratives, literature, cookbooks and pop culture analyses. In the same markets and plantations mentioned before, the chicken was a vehicle for a dose of independence. An important environment for the chicken and black women's relative autonomy was at the plantation. Enslaved women were often in charge of tending to the chickens and keeping a record of the fowl while dressing them for the plantation owner's family dinners. Taking some chickens to the marketplace, using their eggs for meal supplementation and tending to them in general, this "chore" was a way that black women found some degree of self-rule in an enslaved, oppressive world.

In the marketplace, these black women were able to exercise power when dealing with white customers. Black women would sell the profitable parts of the chicken to white customers, like the chicken breasts, legs, and thighs, and would often keep the wings, gizzards and other "undesirable" parts of the chicken for themselves; however, if a black woman wanted to refuse to sell to the white customer, this woman was entitled to do so. In fact, white customers often depended on black women to provide them with

food. Even though these women still had to receive permission to sell the chickens and there were active laws that made it difficult for black women to sell in the market, this exercise of independence in a “profitable capacity” was important to their culture and socioeconomic status (Williams-Forson, 2006, pp. 17). With part of the money that they would earn, these women were also able to supplement some of their family needs on the plantation.

In the 1800s, a stereotype emerged of black individuals and chicken. Even though black women were selling chicken to dependent white customers and tending to the plantation’s chicken population, racist Southern whites associated African Americans with chicken theft. Psyche Williams-Forson shares a story that one black woman in 1876 was blamed for stealing chickens and selling them to a white customer; however, when a white woman claimed that those chickens were “identical” to her lot, the black woman received “thirty-nine lashes” (Williams-Forson, 2006, pp. 27).

Continuing through Reconstruction and into the 1900s, black women cooked and sold chicken to boost their economic status and provide for their families. The stereotype of “blacks are chicken-loving” persevered and through pop-culture, this racism was exemplified. Williams-Forson shows illustrations of “zip coons” drooling over chicken with racist depictions of physical features and speech (Williams-Forson, 2006, pp. 45). White counterparts still did not realize that they were pecking the hands that feed them while depending on black women in the marketplaces and in their own homes.

This racism did not stop with the increasing demand for poultry. In the 1940s, 95% of black farmers were tenants and sharecroppers farming some cash crops (Gisolfi,

2019, pp. 33). When these New Deal, USDA and AAA allotments took place, what was not mentioned before was that these governmental organizations were rotten with discrimination. These allotments of money and land were only given to white farmers, leaving behind and choking out 95% of black men and women who farmed for survival and means of living. In 1948 it was recorded that, “No negroes have hatcheries and a few have commercial flock” in the state of Georgia, while white farms experienced revenues of over \$6 million in 1945 (Gisolfi, 2019, pp. 32). This governmental systematic racism from USDA bureaucrats set up the foundation for white farmers to become poultry giants.

When white men could own and supervise poultry processing plants, racism and sexism towards black women did not cease. Many of the literature and articles discussed such as Gray’s *Arkansas’s First Boomtown*, Stuesse’s *Scratching Out A Living*, Striffler’s *The Dangerous Transformation*, and Lipscomb’s *Exploration of Work and Health Disparities Among Black Women Employed in Poultry Processing in the Rural South* all detail that black women comprised a large percentage of working individuals in the poultry plants. Stuesse details a narrative from a grandmother who used to work in the plants in the 1970s, “When a young lady would come in looking for work, they [supervisors] would tell her they have to examine her in order to get the job. Yes, she would have to sleep with them” (in Stuesse, 2016, pp. 131). The same grandmother explained that she was fired because she refused to sleep with the same supervisor. In fact, a group of over 100 women filed a sexual harassment claim against poultry giant

Koch Foods with the Department of Justice, but the case was not taken seriously and not one single supervisor from Koch was terminated (Stuesse, 2016, pp. 131).

Latin American immigrants have also seen discrimination and racism in the poultry industry. The same type of abusive supervisors have called immigrant employees, “Stupid, fucking Mexicans” (Stuesse, 2016, pp. 131). In addition to the equally unwelcome, sexual advances and discriminatory practices from abusive supervisors, Latin American immigrants have seen a harsher legal battle with these industries. Black employees are already citizens of the United States and therefore have social security numbers and other required citizen data; however, immigrants have faced threats of deportation, loss of work and abuse of worker’s rights (Stuesse, 2016, pp. 135).

Often Latinx and black men and women are pitted against each other by the agenda of the white power structure throughout the historical context of the American South. In southern communities where these poultry plants are located, Latinx individuals can be painted as “hardworking” migrants that have arrived to provide for their family, whereas black individuals can be seen as “lazy” (Stuesse 2016). This is obviously a very problematic stereotype. It also has been noted that some migrants have absorbed attitudes that paint black men and women as the lazy stereotype when being immersed in these communities. This is evident in the poultry plants, especially when discussing who has been displaced by job competition; however, this type of racism can go both ways. In fact, poultry plants have been known to be segregated in regard to race, gender and citizenship status. Stuesse states, “Racial hierarchies shift inside the plant, as black worker’s collective seniority, history of struggle, and linguistic and citizenship

privilege proffer them a status that is generally above that of Latino immigrant workers.” (Stuesse, 2016, pp. 221) In addition, black men and women have expressed concerns that, “Newcomers are manipulated by white society to further the goals of the powerful” and that some see the companies as a “conspiracy” to maintain low wages and a low standard of working environments (Stuesse, 2016, pp. 116). Some black employees believe that immigrants “feel obligated to respect white America” because “that’s whose face is on the dollar bill.” (Stuesse, 2016, pp. 131)

It is not surprising that discrimination and racism are prevalent throughout the poultry industry. Throughout history, individuals in power have taken advantage of the underrepresented “other” when it comes to cheap labor, sexual harassment, and racial discrimination. The recent ICE raids and xenophobic rhetoric have empowered American citizens to spread racism and hate on to the same people that feed our society. If the American government really felt emboldened by the act of hiring “illegal” or undocumented immigrants, government officials would begin by prosecuting owners of Koch, Tyson, Peco and other poultry giants that have hindered the lives of many immigrants through their poultry factories. The Immigration Reform and Control Act was passed in 1986, which imposed sanctions on companies that hired “illegal” immigrants, but what sanctions have been imposed on these poultry giants? Instead, the people and officials in power have only emboldened one another and have left the “other” to fend for themselves.



## *PUBLIC HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENT*

Maybe one of the most important issues in today's time is how chicken production affects public health and the environment. In the workplace, injuries are abundant and compensation is limited. In the consumer's lives, processed chicken is having a more detrimental effect than red meat- especially in fast food settings (Striffler, 2005, pp.6). And in the environment, we see a constant state of pollution, runoff, and questionable ethical choices on how the chickens are treated.

In the poultry processing plants, injuries to factory workers are not uncommon. Repetitive motion injuries are the most common among workers, clocking in over 10,000 repetitions per shift (Lipscomb, 2005, pp. 3). These motions can result in carpal tunnel, tendinitis, muscle strains, trigger finger, back injuries and more. What's more unfortunate is that there is a high turnover rate when these injuries occur. Even if the injuries are reported, many factory workers are told to keep working or to take a "quick break" in the break room- unpaid of course (Stuesse, 2016, pp. 137). Stuesse, Striffler, Williams-Forson, and Lipscomb, point out black women seem to find themselves being the primary receiver of these injuries. One exception, where men are the primary workers, is the section of the line where the chickens are finally put to their death by decapitation. Stuesse discusses how this section of the line is the bloodiest, most intensive part of the processing factory and relative to the other positions is paid more. While higher pay is enticing, this position is no stranger to losing fingers or having one's apron being sucked into industrial fans (Stuesse, 2016, pp. 121). The physical labor inside the factories is unparalleled. Many men and women are processing over 175 birds

per minute while yielding sharp tools in a hot factory. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has no standard on factory line speeds and USDA and OSHA fail to regulate this process. While OSHA states that workers are entitled to compensation, acknowledgment or money is rarely ever given unless one legally sues. In fact, many individuals who suffer from injuries are usually terminated. The poultry giants often count on workers to not know their rights and, therefore, not taking legal action against the company.

Another matter that OSHA legally entitles workers to is bathroom breaks and states that supervisors can not impose unreasonable restrictions on one's right to use the bathroom. However, this right is rarely provided and one woman states,

I stood on the line for thirty minutes and held myself. I was like this [bent over], I was hurting so bad. Finally, I took off running and I like to fell over my apron. When I got to the restroom lady in there said, "Baby, what wrong?" I said, "Please, help me!" I couldn't even get my equipment off. I had been waiting for a break for thirty minutes and the lead person was just steadily telling me, "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Wait a minute." (Stuesse, 2016, pp. 135)

To avoid these interactions, Stuesse also states that workers will become dehydrated and drink as little liquid as possible to hold their bladders for as long as possible. Black and immigrant women have urinated on themselves multiple times in the factory lines. For the company, the absence of someone on the line is seen as a profit loss. When someone is in the bathroom, at that moment, no one is processing those chickens, which equals a loss in profit. In these situations, human rights are completely ignored and abused.

Another ignored and underrepresented part of the processing plants is the chicken itself. Starting from the broilers, chickens are kept under heating lamps, in dark and filthy conditions. Cleaned out only every few years at a time, Friedrich details that there is always “Sh\*t in the meat.” (Friedrich, 2005, pp. 14) In fact, chickens have to be pumped full of antimicrobials to have the “chickens grow bigger and faster, and because it keeps the animals alive in conditions so filthy that they would otherwise suffer massive death losses.” (Friedrich, 2005, pp. 15) The chickens are seen as a profit number for the poultry giants. When altering the life cycle of chicken with chemicals and antibiotics just to hang it from a factory line, questions of ethics are immaterial. In about 20 years, the chicken started from small farming and trading, became an industrialized commodity that fed American people, treated chickens inhumanely and garnered a profit of obscene amounts.

Labor laws, discrimination and the unethical treatment of chickens in the workplace mostly affect the individuals themselves and their families, but from the outside, some find it easier to ignore than others. However, this should not be the case. These poultry giants are affecting more than the beings inside the factories. To start with the consumer, chicken is affecting the people who eat the chicken itself. Stuesse details that the average American eats about ninety pounds of chicken per year and that’s double what the average number was in 1980. Steve Striffler mentioned in *The Dangerous Transformation* that, “Americans believe that chicken can do no wrong” and in the 1970s consumers just wanted something healthier and less expensive than red meat. However, Striffler continues on to say, “The chicken we eat today is frequently more expensive and less healthy than the unhealthy product we intend it to replace. In this way, cheap, healthy

food has become a not-so-affordable way of getting fat.” (Striffler, 2007, pp. 31) With this increase in chicken consumption, there has also been a noticeable increase in obesity, heart disease, cancer, and degenerative illnesses. In one study conducted by researchers, men who consumed a specific number of eggs were compared with relations with prostate cancer. Friedrich describes the study stating,

These researchers found a statistically significant positive association (81% increased risk) between prostate cancer and the consumption of 2.5 eggs per week, compared to men who consumed less than half an egg per week. Among men who were diagnosed with prostate cancer during the study, those who consumed 3.5 or more servings of poultry per week after being diagnosed had a 69% increased risk of lethal prostate cancer compared to men who consumed less than 1.5 servings per week. (pp. 13)

Heart disease, obesity, cancers, and other ailments seem to follow this trend: the more poultry one eats, the greater the chance of falling victim to these health issues. In addition, when one thinks of obesity and heart disease related to chicken, it is easier to notice how inexpensive it is. Fast food restaurants serve cheap, processed chicken often to people who do not have access to fresh markets or the ability to finance a vegetarian diet. While aiding in many people’s mission to not go hungry, the poultry giants are feeding the trend of obesity- especially in impoverished areas where, maybe ironically, these poultry factories are located.

Finally, these poultry giants are contributing to climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) predicts a time limit until 2050. At

2050, the carbon emission amount will be at the point of no return causing extreme weather disasters and global warming (Allen, Dube, Solecki, Aragón-Durand, Cramer, Humphreys, Kainuma, Kala, Mahowald, Mulugetta, Perez, Wairiu, & Zickfeld, 2018, pp 3). These poultry factories are contributing to the carbon emissions that will eventually destroy the planet and its habitats. Inefficient methods of processing chicken and distributing chicken waste are some of the largest contributors to the serious factors that are endangering ecosystems. For example, one calorie of chicken equals fifty-two grams of carbon dioxide when in the processing stages, totaling in over 18% of greenhouse gas emissions (Friedrich, 2005, pp.6). In addition, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has failed in regulating the waste mitigation regarding these poultry giants.

According to *Industrial Swine and Poultry Production Causes Chronic Nutrient and Fecal Microbial Stream Pollution*, “Poultry waste is usually collected as dry litter, mixed with straw, and spread on neighboring fields,” which can result in polluting watersheds with an overabundance of microbes, toxins, and nutrients (Mallin, McIver, Robuck, & Dickens, 2015, pp. 407). The study goes on to detail how ammonium is created by the nitrates in human and animal fecal matter, which creates toxic algae blooms and decreases the pH of water, making it more acidic. In North Carolina, these ammonium concentrations have increased by, “500% in the Neuse River and 315% in the Northeast Cape Fear River between 1995 and 2005” due to poultry production waste (Mallin, et. al, 2015, pp. 407).

Recently, the IPCC released a report that addressed the need for humanity to limit carbon emissions and stop the Earth’s temperature from rising beyond 1.5 degrees

Celsius (Allen, et. al 2018, pp 3). With the poultry industry creating about 18% of those emissions, about ⅓ of industrial emissions could be mitigated. In addition to the pollution that this industry creates, society has also seen a correlated increase in diabetes and other various diseases with the increasing demand for chicken. The public health and environment have suffered from pollution, the labor force that processes the chickens are working in an unsafe workplace, yet the poultry giants have done little to remedy any of these detrimental implications.

### *WHAT'S NEXT?*

While there seems to be only a little hope for the future of the poultry industry, the question of why industry and society peck the hands that feed them still remains. From looking at the literature reviewed, I believe the answer is found in fundamental and systematic power structures that reward profit over human rights. From the Antebellum era onwards, chicken has been used to control black women, to perpetuate negative stereotypes about African Americans, and to sustain the supply of cheap immigrant labor, all to benefit the individuals and corporations that have profited from a system of privilege, bolstered from government agencies' money and power. The externalities have been many, including the lives of people working inside the plants to the consumers and the natural world.

In the next chapter, I continue to answer the question of why society is pecking the hands that feed it through an analysis of policies and Supreme Court decisions that have been enacted in the United States. I discuss the use of unions in the workplaces,

environmental policies, agricultural policies while using a variety of primary and secondary sources. I also consider socioeconomic and racial inequalities when analyzing policies and their effects on American citizens, immigrants, and agribusiness. I believe that with the analysis of policies, there will be a better understanding of how society has arrived at the convenient privilege of passively endorsing the poultry industry.

### *CHAPTER THREE: POLICY REVIEW*

It all began with Lithuanian immigrants Jurgis Rudkus and Ona Lukoszaite, and their fictional journey to the meatpacking district of Chicago at the turn of the 20th century. Upton Sinclair's novel, *The Jungle*, details the hardships of workers in the meatpacking industry and the dangers the workers faced. Before Sinclair began writing the novel, he spent close to ten weeks in the meatpacking district observing the conditions in which mainly immigrants were required to work. What Sinclair saw was acid injuring the fingers of workers, employees having to watch their step before they fall in boiling vats of meat, infrequent bathroom breaks, low wages and long hours (Sinclair, 1985, pp. 111,135). The author's work depicted tensions between employees and factory owners, understanding that the employees were being treated similarly to the animals they were slaughtering (Chicago Tribune, 2018).

Sinclair's novel successfully appealed to the sympathies of Americans and, in response, the United States government passed the Meat Inspection Act of 1906. Just a year after the publication of *The Jungle*, the legislation mandated the inspection and maintenance of the quality of meats including goat, beef, pork, and other livestock. (Lerner, 2011, pp. 548). While this act did not require action from the United States Department of Agriculture to inspect poultry, the Meat Inspection Act of 1906 was the beginning of reactionary policies from the government to create order in the meat



industry arena; however, this particular legislation was not the outcome Upton Sinclair had hoped his book would inspire (Lerner, 2011, pp. 548).

The Meat Inspection Act of 1906 was a response to public outcry after reading *The Jungle*; however, the legislation misses the point of the novel entirely. While the novel discusses the quality of the meat being processed, the main argument was the mistreatment of workers, mostly immigrants, in the meatpacking industry. In response to the legislation, Sinclair states, “I aimed at the public’s heart, and by accident, I hit it in the stomach.” (Chicago Tribune, 2018) The social welfare of the meatpacking workers was lost on the general public, factory owners and policymakers. Unfortunately, Sinclair’s classic tells a story that is still very common today. The difference is that today, the low wages, long hours, seldom bathroom breaks, and dangers of the workplace are very often located in poultry plants across the American South.

In this chapter, I utilize the same subsections of the last chapter: *Places, Labor, Race & Sex*, and *Public Health and The Environment*. In each section, I analyze policies enacted by the United States federal and state governments that directly affect or are in relation to the poultry industry throughout the American South. In most sections, I begin with Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal, some of its failures and continue to today; however, to appropriately contextualize *Race and Sex*, I begin with Reconstruction and policies enacted during that time period. My sources are mostly primary sources from Supreme Court cases and language from legislation enacted, but I also include secondary sources like podcasts and journal articles.

## *PLACES*

To frame how the poultry industry got to be the hotbed of racial and labor inequality that it is today, the political and economic geography of the United States must be considered. Implemented by Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) and passed by the United States Congress, the New Deal was a series of programs embedded within Keynesian economic thought-- the theory that increasing federal spending and investing into social programs would financially benefit the individual and then, in turn, allow that individual to spend more money to financially benefit the federal government (Harvey, 2007, pp. 11). In the 1930s FDR successfully campaigned on the implementation of The National Labor Relation Act (The Wagner Act), Social Security programs, and the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) to name a few. To pass these programs through the U.S. Congress, FDR had to rely on the support of the white men who held office in the southern states. FDR's negotiation and settlement with the southern legislators ensuring that the state governments would be the entities to administer the federal funds to farmers, factories, and/or individuals (Gisolfi, 2019, pp. 32).

In 1933, one of the larger laws that were passed through Congress was the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 (NIRA). Section 3 of the law gave the U.S. President executive order power to manipulate the rules of private industry in order to pull the American economy out of the Great Depression (Buchholz, 2019). The idea was that the federal government would keep watch on private industries and their conduct codes to ensure competition and prevent the United States from sinking into depression again (Buchholz, 2019). Incidentally, one of the main industries affected was the up and

coming poultry industry in New York City (*A. L. A. Schechter Poultry Corporation v. United States*, 1935.).

The Schechter Poultry company was a live poultry industry and slaughterhouse in metropolitan New York. With the NIRA, Schechter Poultry had standards imposed on their business including how many hours an individual could work, standardized wages, and the quality standards for the chicken sold to the New York public (*A. L. A. Schechter Poultry Corporation v. United States*, 1935). Schechter Poultry refused to follow these mandates set by President Roosevelt since it was harmful to their poultry business and questioned if the President of the United States had the right to set standards in the private market. Schechter Poultry company officials were arrested, tried and convicted of “deliberately violating the code” after selling sick chickens to the public (*United States v. A.L.A. Schechter Poultry Corp.*, 2d Cir. 1935). After a few appeals, the Schechter Poultry case eventually made it to the Supreme Court in 1935. If successfully won by the Schechter Poultry company, this case would help set the foundation for the standards of employment and the role of government in the poultry industry.

The United States Attorney argued for the NIRA stating that the NIRA was clearly imposed to protect employees from “the cutting of wages, and lengthening hours of labor. The basis of which the wages and hour provisions rest is that they are reasonable means of prevention of labor disputes and so are adapted to protect interstate by the burdens of labor disturbances” (*United States v. A.L.A. Schechter Poultry Corp.*, 2d Cir. 1935). In simple terms, this meant that if the government could protect the employee from an industry that could exploit their labor, that, in turn, would protect the greater

economy from any issues with labor disputes later. He continued to justify that the NIRA could protect the American people from not being subjected to another crash in the economy.

However, Schechter Poultry's attorney argued that the basis of the NIRA was unconstitutional. Stating that there are "no standards to guide or restrict his [President Roosevelt's] actions," and that the NIRA is a precedent that would allow the U.S. Congress and the President to actively take part in private business matters. Schechter Poultry's attorney continued to claim that "dictatorship is surely here," if the President could reach into interstate commerce; therefore, "the National Industrial Recovery Act is unconstitutional" (*United States v. A.L.A. Schechter Poultry Corp.*, 2d Cir. 1935).

On January 6th, 1936, a surprising and unexpected decision was read in court by Chief Justice Hughes stating, "We think that the code-making authority thus conferred is an unconstitutional delegation of legislative power" (*United States v. A.L.A. Schechter Poultry Corp.*, 2d Cir. 1935). The NIRA did not provide rules that the President would have to follow when mandating businesses and their code of conduct. In addition, the Court ruled that this law did not have any precedent, even considering the Great Depression, to provide the President with authority to establish minimum wage or other employee protections (*A. L. A. Schechter Poultry Corporation v. the United States*, 1935). Even though the Supreme Court ruled that Section 3 of the NIRA was unconstitutional, it set a precedent for the poultry industry and how the industry treated their labor then and today.

Fast-forwarding some years, the popularity of poultry grew partly due to World War II and the War Food Administration's efforts to promote chicken rather than red meat. The chicken was no longer only a Sunday dinner, but rather a commodity that was processed, dressed and ready to cook (Gisolfi, 2017, pp. 10). Industrial processing and packaging facilitated extraordinary growth in the poultry sector. The path that the poultry industry wanted to take had been stifled by the New Deal and other Keynesian policies- the other sections of the NIRA, including collective bargaining rights, were still protected. Referenced in Chapter 1, neoliberalism was the economic thought that the poultry industry embraced and, with examples of the Upcountry region in northern Georgia and El Dorado's Pilgrims Pride in Arkansas, there were tangible examples of plentiful land and cheap labor that was under pressure *not* to unionize or be mandated to do so in southern states.

During the 1930s the poultry industry had just begun. Starting out as small, household commerce, the industry started to grow and gained more confidence with the decision of the Supreme Court in *Schechter vs. The United States*. Realizing that the political and economic geographies of the United States, supported by Supreme Court decisions and failed policies, continued the exploitation of cheap labor is crucial when understanding why the poultry industry has thrived in the American south. With political and economic geography in mind, I will continue to discuss similar policies that have affected the poultry industry's labor, continuing with the New Deal and finishing with the most recent pro-union legislation.

## LABOR

*“A Better Relationship Between Management and Labor.”  
Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Signing of the Wagner Act 1935*

The title of the thesis, *Pecking the Hands That Feed Them: How Society and Government Have Allowed the Poultry Industry to Exploit Labor and the Environment in the American South*, is testament to my conclusion that the poultry industry is built on a foundation of exploitation and misuse of labor. To understand how the poultry industry has gotten to the graphic narratives that were detailed in Chapter 1, it is crucial to go back in time and understand the history of labor unions and how unions were treated in the United States, specifically in the American South. Starting with Section 7 of the NIRA and then the Wagner Act, I will illustrate the beginning of federal legislation protecting workers; however, with the quick response of the Taft-Hartley Act, it will not be a surprise that poultry labor unions are hard to form today. To illustrate this correctly, I will then discuss the legal challenges that poultry employees face currently.

Section 7 of the NIRA was the foundation of the Wagner Act of 1935 granting employees collective bargaining (The Wagner Act of 1935, 1935). The Wagner Act required factories to not only hire women but also African Americans. This would become very important later when European immigrants were not granted access to the United States due to the beginning of WWII. In addition, the Wagner Act allowed the unionization of workers without prevention from their employers and this meant that poultry factories would have to respond to their employees when on strike (Hahamovitch, 2010, pp. ). In essence, the passing of the Wagner Act was to protect the economy by protecting worker's rights. It was understood that if the government does what industry

repeatedly has not done by protecting the safety and viability of the labor force, it would, therefore, ensure that the economy would be unlikely to crash to the extent of the Great Depression again. Again, this has to do with the Keynesian economic thought of government regulation so the economy would be protected.

The migration of the poultry industry to the American South was hastened after the passing of the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 (sometimes referred to as the National Labor Relations Act). The Wagner Act was one of the most important pieces of legislation enacted by Congress, allowing labor unions and employees the right to address their work conditions and wages. The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, also called the “Slave Labor Bill” by sitting President Harry Truman, amended the Wagner Act and made it illegal to close down the factories or industries in relation to employees unionizing (Mineshema, n.d.). In addition, it became illegal to require employers to pay time for the work not completed during strikes, unions could not have employees pay a union entry fee and dictated appropriate symbolic speech that could be utilized by an employee (Mineshema, n.d.). One of the most important aspects was that negotiating and bargaining for wages was also banned (National Labor Relations Act, 2016).

In 1951, a man peacefully picketed outside of his workplace after he believed that the electrical company he was working for terminated his job in order to give it to a nonunion worker. This peaceful protest spurred a company-wide worker strike. After the original striker was arrested and his case appealed, his case went all the way to the Supreme Court (Vile, n.d.). During *International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers v. National Labor Relations Board*, the union agent argued that it was his right under the

First Amendment that he could peacefully picket; however, following the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, the Supreme Court set a precedent that it was indeed illegal for a union agent to picket in relation to his business. Specifically, the court stated, “we recently have recognized the constitutional right of states to proscribe picketing” (Vile, n.d.). This means the state has a right to outlaw picketing an industry on the behalf of a union. This was an instance of the highest court supporting and enforcing the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 (Vile, n.d.).

A monumental success for the poultry sector, this federal 1947 Act gave states the right to determine what their union laws would be and, today, twenty-seven states are called “Right To Work” states which gives the employee a choice to be in a union or not (Mineshema, n.d.). For example, as of January 22, 2020, New York had about 25% of its employee population participating in unions, while North Carolina only has about 2.2% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). New York is a union state, while North Carolina is a “Right To Work” state.

While the name “Right To Work” sounds as though it gives workers agency, it was mostly a ploy conjured by the southern states to retain the cheap labor workforce that the states were used to utilizing and to suppress unionizing efforts. To get the “Right To Work” initiative on the ballot, states had support from the American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Association of Manufacturers, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, the National Labor-Management Foundation, and the Christian American Association among others (Shermer, 2018). Knowing this, it is no surprise that unionized workers earn up to \$200-\$300 more a week than individuals who are not participating in a union



and a majority of these poorer individuals are located in the American South (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). In fact, Georgia, North Carolina, Alabama, Arkansas, and Mississippi are all the leading states in poultry production and all are “Right To Work” states (Rude, 2017, pp. 5; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020).

Right to Work states thus offer a false choice for workers-- “freedom” or union dues. This, in turn, reduces the amount of financial support the labor unions have in addition to their internal structure and lobbying impact. In addition, the lack of structure and support creates a disorganized union when someone from the industry does want to take the initiative to unionize. For example, Stuesse addresses the many different unions in the southern states in her book *Scratching Out A Living*. The United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), Local 1529, the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU), Alabama Midsouth Council, and Labor International Union of North America, are all forms of labor unions that represent, have represented, dissolved or merged together to create a network of representations for employees in the poultry industry in the American south (Stuesse, 2016, pp.159).

In her discussion of efforts to thwart unionization in Mississippi’s poultry industry, Stuesse shares a story about her time in Forest, MS when poultry employees who were working at Koch Foods poultry plants were trying to strengthen their United Food and Commercial Workers union chapter (UWFC). At one point members of the union posed a strike to better their working conditions in the poultry plant; however, when enacting the strike, Koch supervisors threatened to fire all of the employees immediately and then proceeded to call the local police (Stuesse, 2016, pp.196). After

this event, Koch factory workers pleaded with the UWFC to try and negotiate with Koch Foods. To have a union, Koch detailed that union representatives could be inside the plant and have some negotiating abilities, but, “there should be no publicity. Should the company’s name appear in the media, be it positive or negative coverage, the deal was off” (Stuesse, 2016, pp.199). Union representatives were even able to negotiate a complete list of factory workers to recruit members into the union; however, when the representative received the list, Koch had blacked out any and all information about factory workers except their name effectively creating a barrier to recruit union members (Stuesse, 2016, pp. 200).

While the Taft-Hartley Act is still abided by today, there is hope in the form of a new bill that recently passed the United States House of Representatives. On May 5, 2019, a bill named Protecting the Right to Organize Act of 2019 (PRO Act 2019) was introduced by Democratic Representative Robert Scott from Virginia (Scott, 2020). The bill details many new amendments for the Taft-Hartley Act expanding the definition of “unfair labor practices to include prohibitions against replacement of or discrimination against workers who participate in strikes and makes it an unfair labor practice to require or coerce employees to attend employer meetings designed to discourage union membership” (Scott, 2020). In addition, the 2019 Act, “permits workers to participate in collective or class action litigation, and allows any person to bring a civil action for harm caused by labor law violations or unfair labor practices” (Scott, 2020). On February 6, 2020, this vote was passed through the U.S House of Representatives 224-194 (Scott, 2020). However, since the 2018 Midterm Elections, the House has had a majority of

Democrats after the party gained 41 more seats. Since the Senate holds a Republican majority, the question of it being passed through the Senate in 2020 remains.

While there is still hope in 2020, the likelihood of amending the National Labor Relation Act seems slim and with the laws being in place for many years, the poultry industry has already created a foundation based on the rules and regulations of anti-labor laws. I have only scratched the surface of the ongoing exploitation of the labor industry in relation to the poultry sector and there are many other influences that affect the enacting of these laws. For example, the fact that the poultry industry mainly employs Latinx immigrants and African Americans in the south. If one can already understand that the support of worker's rights is slim, the problem is exponentially worsened when discussing that the individuals fighting for these rights have been fighting for equal rights for hundreds of years. In *RACE & SEX*, I will again begin before the New Deal policies by touching on land designated to black individuals during Reconstruction and lead the discussion to today's policies that affect mainly African Americans and immigrant individuals.

### *RACE & SEX*

The Emancipation Proclamation freed enslaved African Americans from legal bondage in 1863; however, black southerners were far from actual freedom. General William Sherman had created a special government order named, "Special Order 15" which designated over 400,0000 acres taken from the white planters and split up between the thousands of black individuals that were still located in the south (Hannah-Jones,

2019). This becomes known in textbooks as the “40 Acres and a Mule” order. This designation of land would not last long though, because when President Lincoln was assassinated and Andrew Johnson became president, Johnson overturned the order and returned it back to the white southerners (Hannah-Jones, 2019). This revocation of the order helped set a precedent after the Civil War that most black farmers were not and could not be landowners. For decades following, they would become tenant farmers and sharecroppers with a rare chance of a black landowner. In the 1930s only 13 percent of black farmers owned their own land (Castro & Willingham, 2019).

This becomes extremely important when analyzing FDR’s New Deal Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA). The AAA’s goal was to limit crop production due to the surplus of crops during the First World War. How the administration accomplished this was to provide farmers with financial aid if they did *not* farm their crops (Powell, 2012). Not only did this mean that thousands of black tenant farmers lost their jobs, but considering the AAA money was dispersed by state agents, black landowners did not receive much of the financial aid (Powell, 2012). This set a precedent for today as the average white farmer brings about \$17,000 in income while the average black farmers only make \$2,400 in income (Castro & Willingham, 2019).

In 1936, the Supreme Court did strike down the AAA policy of paying farmers to not produce a crop in their land in *Butler vs. the United States*; however, this case had no interest in advocating for black landowners or the black tenant farmers suffering from this policy. This AAA policy was deemed unconstitutional specifically because the Act, “attempted to regulate and control agricultural production...Congress was using the

spending power as an enforcement mechanism to control activity that was completely within the authority of the states” (United States v. Butler, n.d.). While the Act was deemed unconstitutional, in 1936, The Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act was put into law which entails a “United States federal law that allowed the government to pay farmers to reduce production so as to conserve soil and prevent erosion” (Gisolfi, 2019, pp. 29). The Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act was, in fact, similar to the AAA policy that was just deemed unconstitutional month before (Gisolfi, 2019, pp. 29).

In 1942, the United States had just entered World War II after the Pearl Harbor attacks. White farmers were still benefiting from financial subsidies to limit the production of crops and there were still thousands of impoverished, black sharecroppers and tenant farmers working on the land. In fact, in Monica Gisolfi’s book, she quotes a government official from the 1940s who states “Some farm area Negro day laborers are told not to have radios in the house...Landowners feared that workers would hear about laws that forbade low wages and long hours” (Gisolfi, 2017, pp. 26). This was before the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947. In addition, the War Food Administration has started to ration red meat for the troops overseas and enacted the Grow More Poultry Program of 1942 (Gisolfi, 2017, pp. 29). This program, in response to the rationing of red meat and consumer demand, subsidized or provided meat suppliers with broilers and other technology for chicken production with an expected goal of producing 200 million chickens in one year. And in 1943, the number of chickens produced exceeded that expected goal (Gisolfi, 2017, pp. 29).

Still, the technological and financial subsidies to produce chicken were granted by the United States Department of Agriculture agents at the county level who, in the South, were overwhelmingly white; therefore, black tenant farmers and sharecroppers received few if any benefits. In relation to the USDA agents, Author Monica Gisolfi states, “The agency systematically discriminated against African American farmers, who did not share the poultry wealth as they received little aid from government agents, who focused exclusively on white farmers” (Gisolfi, 2017, pp. 32). This plantation-style power structure set a precedent because today, poultry factory owners are still white with an employee base that is largely African American and Latinx.

Latinx immigrants make up the large base of poultry factory employees. This trend began in 1943 due to the FDR Administration’s Bracero Program. The Bracero Program was in response to the working shortage in the agriculture field due to WWII (Robinson, 2010, pp. 383). Over 22 years, the government contracted over 4 million workers out of Mexico for agricultural jobs (Hazelton, 2017, pp. 432). While the workers from Mexico had leverage to demand better wages and safety from exploitation, there was very little oversight by the government when Braceros would finally be contracted to farms. After the War, able-bodied Americans came back for work, but when placed next to migrants who would work for a lot less, farmers would end up keeping the Braceros on their farm instead of hiring Americans (Hazelton, 2017, pp. 433). While this was great for the Braceros who needed work, it laid the conditions for Mexican and, later, other Latinx workers to be exploited in labor practices. In 1953, Louisiana Senator, Allen Ellender, lobbied for the total neoliberal, non-governmental intervention when hiring Braceros for

farm works, which would allow his farming constituents to not have to pay any taxes or officially make their labor legal (Hazelton, 2017, pp. 434).

Another important precedent set by a policy was the “Texas Proviso” in 1952 which protected farm and other industry owners from persecution if the United States border control found that their employees were illegal or had been smuggled on to the farm (Hazelton, 2017, pp. 435). Towards the end of the Bracero Program, Bracero advocates were very effective when pushing for Braceros to have the same rights as American farmworkers, which meant the small amount of unionization ability that was left from the Taft-Hartley Act, the educational and childcare options that the federal government provided for Americans and some social security; however, this was not necessarily effective in the way that the advocated planned to be. In 1963 when the Bracero Program was up for renewal in the House of Representatives, it failed to pass by sixteen votes (Hazelton, 2017, pp. 450). These twenty-two years were a sad illustration of how *even* when the American food system was in danger because of the shortage of labor, the U.S government did not want to provide any social benefits to the Latinx immigrants that had to struggle and travel distances to work for cheap wages on a farm. Even though the Bracero Program has expired, the increasing number of undocumented employees working for American farms and industries did not cease, thanks to later policies that encouraged low-wage work from Latinx immigrants.

In 1986, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was enacted into law. The IRCA technically reversed the state legislative “Texas Privoso” precedent by imposing sanctions on employers who were found to be hiring undocumented workers in

their factories. This really came into play in the poultry industry. For example, when migrant workers were recruited by poultry industry advisors, migrants were pressured to have papers proving that they were American citizens or legal residents. The IRCA encouraged an “under-the-table” method of employers and migrant workers breaking the law for work and cheap labor (Stuesse, 2016, pp.187). This entailed that both parties would look the other way until one party took part in union activities and advocated for their own worker’s rights. At this point, the industry would use its legal leverage and, most likely, terminate the immigrant employee (Stuesse, 2016, pp.187).

This created a channel for a third-party contractor to work between the poultry plant and migrant workers. Not asking for any governmental or identifying papers, these third party contractors hire out poultry workers to Tyson, Koch, and other poultry industries. This makes it very difficult to receive earned benefits like social security or workplace injury compensation, and the contractors mainly pay their workers with cash payments instead of checks (Stuesse, 2016, pp.190). Within the current neoliberal context, these contractors are barely regulated by any type of state or federal government, leaving a large amount of room for labor exploitation.

In 1996, another law was enacted which has seriously affected women and immigrants in the poultry industry. President Bill Clinton had signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) which stripped down welfare and entitlement programs. Under this law, immigrants are required to wait five years after they receive “legal” and qualified status to receive any federal welfare



benefits (Kasich, 1996). If an immigrant is temporary or undocumented they do not qualify for any type of financial program (Kasich, 1996).

In addition to immigrants, black and Latinx women are also severely discriminated against under the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act. Federally, a woman holds the responsibility to identify and connect with their child's biological father to receive full child support; this was to encourage marriage instead of single-parenthood (Boushey, 2001). The 1996 Act receives a lot of criticism for how the law treats women, but specifically women of color. It requires single mothers to work at least 20 hours a week to receive any welfare funding and when working 40 hours a week, the funding will cease; however, with the wage gap among male and females being about twenty cents on the dollar, even working full time, a woman who is earning minimum wage will not be able to make enough money for herself and her children. This is exponentially worsened when knowing that workplaces have often discriminated against black women (Boushey, 2001). The PRWORA was criticized to seemingly be made for male wages, but in reality, 90% of individuals who collect under PRWORA are single mothers (Boushey, 2001).

In 2001, the New York Times reported that Tyson, one of the largest chicken processing industries, was indicted on 36 counts of smuggling undocumented immigrants to work in its poultry processing plants (Barboza, 2001). Tyson corporate officials were accused of paying anywhere from \$100-\$300 per worker for immigrants to be smuggled to their factories in Tennessee, Virginia, Arkansas and other southern states (Barboza, 2001). Conspirators also allegedly had false social security numbers and birth certificates

made for the migrants and expected payment from the smuggled migrants themselves in return for their opportunity to work. Government documents also revealed that Tyson used third party contractors, like Stuesse detailed, to conceal the hiring of undocumented workers (Barboza, 2001). In 2003, Tyson went before a jury and was cleared on all 36 counts after five hours of jury deliberation (Day, 2003). In addition to Tyson, the employers who helped obtain false documents and the smugglers (who were facing up to 60 years in prison) were also cleared of all charges (Day, 2001).

Poultry factories, advertised as havens of full time, honest work, have been places of exploitation for people of color. The U.S government has enacted policies that have encouraged immigrants workers, and passed policies that leave them living under the poverty line for at least five years- if one can become “qualified.” For African Americans, financial aid since the beginning of poultry farming has been denied. Again, America is pecking the hands that feed it. Trapped in a poultry factory, a cycle of oppression and unfair labor practices on people of color is hidden from the average American consuming poultry to the point where a jury can acquit Tyson on 36 counts of smuggling undocumented workers to be employed in heartbreaking conditions that were mentioned in Chapter 1. In the next and final section of this chapter, I address how the chicken industry has affected not just African American or Latinx migrants, but also anyone and everyone who consumes chicken on a regular basis.

## *PUBLIC HEALTH & ENVIRONMENT*

In Chapter 1, I discussed the health and environmental issues that surround the production and consumption of industrially-produced chicken. In factories, employees are placed under extreme pressure and in painful positions. With regards to public health, basic inspections on chickens are completed, but knowledge around the health consequences of consuming *so much* chicken is rarely discussed. In this final section, I will discuss the lack of policy that regulates the safety of poultry processing plants and the effects that the plants have on the environment.

In 1918, a mysterious illness struck people all over the globe. Over 500 million individuals, about one-third of the world's population at the time, were infected and over 50 million of those people perished soon after being infected (Center for Disease Control, 2018). While this virus was not well documented at the time, what doctors and scientists suspected was that it was a type of flu, the flu with avian nature and most likely came from a chicken (Center for Disease Control, 2018). Avian influenza was the killer of over 50 million people.

Avian influenza sparked a lot of fear among the American public and even though the “chicken boom” of WWII was still years away, pressure on the U.S government to start inspecting chicken like it did beef and pork became serious. Finally, in 1926 the United States enacted the Federal Poultry Inspection Service (FPIS) which inspected chicken at every registered slaughterhouse and live poultry entry points like railroads and shipping ports (National Research Council Committee, 1987). The government did not stop at live poultry and even went so far as to set regulations and inspections for

postmortem poultry as well, ensuring that avian influenza would not become a mass murderer again. The FPIS was very beneficial and preemptive to what the regulation of poultry could have been at that time. USDA officials were mostly successful in ensuring the safety of slaughtering processes, and inspection of every poultry product; however, in 1926, the poultry industry and their standards were not what they are today (National Research Council Committee, 1987).

In 1957 the Poultry Production Inspection Act (PPIA) was passed into law, following the FPIS, but more thorough in the inspection process. The increased consumer demand after WWII prompted this legislation with the recognized importance poultry was gaining. The United States Congress stated in the PPIA preamble,

Unwholesome, adulterated, or misbranded poultry products impair the effective regulation of poultry products in interstate or foreign commerce, are injurious to the public welfare, destroy markets for wholesome, not adulterated, and properly labeled and packaged poultry products, and result in sundry losses to poultry producers and processors of poultry and poultry products, as well as injury to consumers (National Research Council Committee, 1987).

Instead of only checking at all the poultry exit and entry points, the PPIA regulated the entire production process. USDA officials were required to complete inspections inside the plants and processing plants had to follow sanitary restrictions. Similar to the FPIS, this was a positive piece of legislation that seemed to benefit the American public in regards to poultry safety, but the exception was the federal

government allowed the states to inspect plants to whatever degree the states saw fit (National Research Council Committee, 1987).

In 1962, the United States experienced another astounding form of activism. Scientist Rachel Carson published her classic book, *Silent Spring*. Carson's focus was mainly on the chemical compound DDT and its disastrous and murderous effect on the environment and its people. Similar to Sinclair's *The Jungle*, public outcry pressured the U.S. government to pass legislation in order to protect the vulnerable; however, because Carson is a woman in a field dominated by men, the amount of time it took to respond to *Silent Spring* was slower. After being berated and insulted by the science community, she testified in Congress on the effects of DDT and what industry is doing to the Earth's environment. She was successful with the banning of DDT but unfortunately did not live to see it due to her battle with breast cancer.

Even though her focus was on DDT, Carson also mentioned other issues involving pesticides, including biomagnification, which is the concentration of chemicals throughout the bodies of animals when consumed (Carson, 1962, pp. 109). This is the term that inspired the Wholesome Poultry Act of 1967. An example of biomagnification is if a chicken consumes corn that has been doused with a pesticide, or if the chicken has been injected with hormones or other chemicals, that concentration of chemicals will become more severe when traveling up the food chain to the human consumer. So not only did the Wholesome Poultry Act require states to finally meet the federal standard of inspection but it also established a "National Residue Program" which judged and regulated the number of chemicals that were presented in poultry by collecting and

testing a number of random samples of postmortem poultry (National Research Council Committee, 1987). This meant that the Act of 1967 required every single chicken and poultry product to be federally inspected before being sold to a consumer.

As of 2020, the United States Department of Agriculture under the Food Safety Inspection Service states,

States may operate their own [inspection] programs if they meet and enforce requirements “at least equal to” those imposed under the Federal Meat Inspection Act, Poultry Products Inspection Act (PPIA) State-inspected meat and poultry products are limited to intrastate commerce only. (USDA, 2014).

Federal regulation since the PPIA and Wholesome Poultry Act are still in use today and there are no plans to introduce any other inspection legislation for poultry processing plants in the current administration.

As for environmental protections and regulations of poultry plants, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has been criticized for not following their own regulations. Under the Clean Water Act and the Clean Air Act, the EPA is required to collect emissions and pollution data from concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) which are livestock and poultry farms that keep the animals in close proximity to one another; rather than being permitted to graze, food is brought to the animal (Environmental Protection Agency, 2012). CAFOs are really big stressors to the environment around them because they produce an enormous amount of nitrogen-rich waste which can easily produce runoff and enter the water system (Environmental Protection Agency, 2012). Producing food for poultry and livestock also emits large

amounts of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere (Gustin, et. al, 2016). The poultry industry accounts for 18% of carbon emissions released into the atmosphere (Friedrich, 2005, pp.6).

In 2016, an investigation had been initiated into the EPA and its officials. The investigation detailed that the EPA had failed to honor it's regulations and had not been collecting air emission and water waste data from CAFOs (Gustin, et. al, 2016). Even though the EPA signed the Air Compliance Agreement in 2005, detailing that it would measure the number of toxic emissions from factory farms, the EPA had failed to do so, collecting no data (Gustin, et. al, 2016). In addition, it does not help that President Trump has rolled back almost all of the previous EPA regulations that provide rules to factory farms and large companies to follow (Gustin, et. al, 2016). Most recently, President Trump has rolled back regulation of the Clean Water Act, reducing restrictions and regulations that farmers and industries would have to follow (Dumas, 2019).

In relation to employees in poultry processing plants and their health, after years of policymakers ignoring the need to protect workers and their safety, the Department of Labor and Poultry have signed an agreement with Poultry Industry Alliance Partners, who are advocates for poultry employees (Occupational Safety and Health Administration, 2019). While I believe this is a constructive beginning, I am skeptical about whether this two-year program will aid employees for the better. OSHA details that, "posters on safe handling and labeling, educational resources for industry employers and workers on restroom breaks, and effective ergonomic approaches," will be implemented to instruct employees on how to perform appropriately in the workplace

(Occupational Safety and Health Administration, 2019). While posters and educational resources on bathroom breaks are well-intentioned, the amount of exploitation in the processing plants is far from ending because of an educational poster.

There has not been much legislation in the protection of the health and safety of the poultry processing employee. This lack of legislation is very much intertwined with the difficulty to unionize to advocate for these rights. Lack of legislation is not only in regard to employee health but also in consumer health. Mentioned in the previous chapter, Americans eat over ninety pounds of chicken in a year, believing that chicken is the healthy savior, the healthiest of the meats (Striffler, 2007, pp. 31). And while there is plentiful research on how poultry can be detrimental to one's health, there is obviously little legislation regarding the regulation of poultry to protect the consumer's well-being.

### *WHAT'S NEXT*

Policies and legislation since the beginning of Reconstruction and through the New Deal, have set the foundation for how the poultry industry is regulated currently. Once again, legislation has missed the mark when considering acts or laws that could protect the exploitation of employees and the health of the consumer. Similar to Sinclair's *The Jungle*, policy-makers in the U.S. government have misunderstood, or ignored, the public's displeasure with the meat and poultry industry. FDR attempted to secure worker's rights with the Wagner Act, but protection vanished when the Taft-Hartley Act was enacted. "Right To Work" states have stifled the voices of laborers who desire a better and safer work environment. Black Americans have continued to see the racism



that has embedded itself into the agricultural industry, since colonialism and continuing through the New Deal's AAA allotments as well. All of these actions committed on behalf of the United States government have left the poultry industry's laborers to suffer at the hands of poultry industry elites.

In the final chapter, I answer the question of why society is pecking the hands that feed them. I piece the information together to explain why the poultry industry has exploited people of color, in addition to polluting the environment and becoming a creeping public health danger to consumers. I also address what could be next in terms of labor unions and possible policies that provide hope for the poultry industry's future in the American South.

#### CHAPTER FOUR: SO WHY ARE WE PECKING?

While many industries across the world are plagued with racism and inequality, the poultry industry has situated itself in the backyard and everyday lives of the American public. A majority of Americans consume chicken on an everyday basis and, for southerners, the industry has situated itself in neighboring towns and communities. When traveling through southern states one can view unmarked buildings, similar to warehouses, built in rows that are barely hidden behind the treelines. These commercial broilers contain thousands of chickens that will be sent to a processing plant. While traveling through Northern Georgia in late February of 2020, the facts that I had researched came to life. Monica Gisolfi's *The Takeover: Chicken farming and the Roots of American Agribusiness*, details how the poultry industry consumed the lives and communities of Northern Georgia, but when actually traveling through the region and viewing hundreds of broilers positioned next to poor communities, the reality of inequality that Monica Gisolfi detailed was tangible; however, there is some hope created by labor unions and advocates.

Unions and cooperatives have started to form in response to the dangerous and discriminatory environment of the chicken processing plants. In 1972, the Mississippi Poultry Workers Union (MPWU) was formed, which aided in the voicing of concerns regarding bathroom breaks, compensation, and safety. While initially open only to African American workers the union now has been able to bring together immigrants and

black members alike in the search for an equitable workplace (Stuesse, 2016, pp.67). The bridge of races could indicate a progression away from stereotypes and concepts that Psyche Williams-Forsen discusses. While the South's neoliberal policies and racism often prevail, unions have had some success stories. When black women were being denied bathroom breaks, the MPWU was able to file suit under the OSHA's fair bathroom break policy. As a result, the union won and some progressive steps were made (Stuesse, 2016, pp. 134). In addition to winning some cases, the union also allows a channel of communication between immigrants who speak little English and who may not know their rights as an employee working in the United States and individuals who do. By educating immigrants on knowing their rights, the advantage that poultry giants have over their employees is slowly decreasing. While there is a long way to go, Stuesse has hope that this will help the wellbeing of workers and regulation of the poultry industry.

As for the environment, while the EPA and current administration have failed farms and consumers, family farm culture has been a staple in communities for hundreds of years and is becoming a resurgent interest in niche companies and communities that focus on producing pasture-raised poultry while promoting safe work environments. While expensive and a privilege, consumers can buy pasture-raised chickens and other chicken products that support local farms or ethical industry practices at large chain stores. In the fast-food industry, chickens are not supplied by ethical companies but rather poultry elites that have exploited people and communities. Just as Steve Striffler details in his book, *Chicken: The Dangerous Transformation of America's Favorite Food*, this

fast-food chicken consumption is proven to be extremely unhealthy and the effects are concentrated in poorer communities. Policies have a long way to go in order to protect the environment and consumers from the poultry industry.

Since I began researching and writing this thesis, our environments and communities have changed rapidly. As of mid-March, the world is experiencing a monumental pandemic and the United States is seeing mandatory “shelter-in-place” policies implemented by local and state governments to halt the spread of the coronavirus. If inequality was not visible enough before, it is today. Many people are working from home and social distancing to protect themselves and their families; however, people who are not as privileged are being required to attend work and place themselves and possible family members in harm’s way. As of March 18th, 2020, Tyson and other poultry companies are requiring their employees to work in a factory with close proximity to hundreds of other employees. Tyson states, “We have encouraged all team members to seek immediate medical attention and avoid coming to work if they are experiencing symptoms,” but with narratives from workers in Stuesse’s book, it is hard to imagine that ill employees would have their job upon return (Rouse, 2020).

As of April 1st, Southern states have followed others by mandating “stay-at-home” orders to continue to limit the spread of the virus; however essential workers, such as undocumented immigrants who work on farms and at poultry plants, are still required to attend work. While essential, the more than one million immigrant workers are still undocumented and face the threat of deportation (Jordan, 2020). ICE is still making arrests during the pandemic. The Los Angeles Times, explains that ICE is

not halting their arrests of undocumented immigrants, but are wearing masks and gloves to prepare for the coronavirus (Mejia, 2020). More than 45 immigrant advocacy groups signed petitions to suspend arrests, but, citing criminal activity, ICE ignored the requests (Mejia, 2020). In regards to ICE, some immigrants are slowly recovering with the help of the University of Mississippi Law School students seven months after the Mississippi ICE raids. The MacArthur Justice Center has raised over \$750,000 in donations which have contributed to many immigrants' bail bonds (Hitson, 2020). In addition, many immigrants are being represented and interviewed to create awareness around the ICE raids.

So how has society arrived at pecking that hands that feed it? I believe the attitude started hundreds of years ago during colonization. Books like Hahamovitch's *The Fruits of Their Labor: Atlantic Coast Farmworkers and the Making of Migrant Poverty* and Williams-Forson's *Building Houses Out of Chicken Legs: Black Women, Food, and Power* detail the hardships and attitudes towards race, sex and labor since the 1600s. Stuesse's *Scratching Out a Living Latinos, Race, and Work in the Deep South* has brought the current situation to light and has connected chicken and labor policies. Supreme Court decisions and policies have ultimately allowed exploitation in the poultry industry, continuing the acceptance of exploitative culture amongst consumers. In addition, while activists work hard to fight racism, sexism, and insecurity in the poultry sector, I believe that a majority of Americans are not aware of how the poultry industry survives today and are content with blind consumerism. The well-being of immigrants and African Americans is often swept under the rug and has been for centuries; therefore,

I do not believe many Americans realize they *are* pecking the hands that feed them. This permits the suffering of the poultry industry to continue undisturbed.

During this pandemic, the treatment of immigrants and poor communities has only been exacerbated by the reality of income inequality. If people are not aware of atrocities that occur inside poultry factories or in other industries that exploit labor, I think now, during social isolation, is a time to develop that sense of compassion for those who are not as privileged to stay home, but rather have to work long hours in a poultry processing plant. Hopefully, the worst of this pandemic will pass before the 2020 Presidential and Congressional elections, and perhaps voters will advocate for policies that will protect the wellbeing of the laborers and workers that feed them.

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